

10 April 2025

Dear Dean Avilez,

It is with feelings of great sadness that I write to inform you that I resign as Director of the [Center for Austrian Studies](#) (CAS), effective immediately. I will, however, work to ensure a smooth transition to the next leadership team at the Center and a conclusion to this semester's activities. I have served CAS now for a decade and am pleased to say that over this period I was well supported by the university, college, and most importantly the Institute for Global Studies. CAS has thrived in this period with an active scholarly program, international exchange as well as steady and increasing financial support from donors and the Austrian government.

The events of the past ten days thus came as a sudden shock when on Tuesday, April 1, you informed us that the university had decided to remove a statement that CAS had made in February 2022 in support of the Ukrainian people in response to the unprovoked Russian invasion of their country. After serious consideration and in the light of three factors, the history, the process, and the policy behind the removal of the statement, with heavy heart I resign my position as Director of CAS.

History

CAS (established 1977) is a Research Center investigating the past, present, and future of Central and Eastern Europe. In my decade as Director, CAS has issued only one statement on a contemporary event, the unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. We have made no further statements concerning the atrocities in this war, the controversial change in US policy, or broader historical and cultural questions concerning Ukrainian or Russian identity.

As such, our statement was part of a broader international, national, UMN, and local response to an invasion which occurred more than three years ago. Our statement was linked to that of [ASEEES](#), the international scholarly association of the field, and nearly two hundred other academic entities across North America and Europe. Here at UMN there were several official statements and resolutions including that of the [University Senate](#) and [President's Office](#) culminating with a rapid divestment of Russian investments. Indeed, the President's statement was deemed so important that it was sent in an email to the entire university community on February 28, 2022 where she declared unequivocally, "This is an atrocity," and "we stand with the people of Ukraine."

The events at the University of Minnesota in February and March 2022 are part of the historical record. These events occurred regardless of current policy. The University came together in a remarkable way to protest the Russian invasion. The removal of the CAS statement is not the simple removal of a statement but also the removal of an important historical document of our Center and the university. It is an attempt to suppress or even erase a laudable moment in the university's past in response to an international crisis. This sudden decision is thoughtless and cruel to our Ukrainian students and local Ukrainian communities who have already begun to express their outrage of what they perceive as betrayal.

Process

In these politically fraught times, though I may not agree, I do understand the university's concerns about issuing statements on controversial current events. I am, however, deeply troubled by the process of determining what is and what is not objectionable to the university. You informed us on Tuesday morning

that the CAS statement of February 2022 would be removed later that day. We were not consulted about the process, merely informed.

Two days later in a meeting with Provost Croson, I requested that she clarify her comment to her advisory committee, "*We continue to strongly encourage our community members to teach, conduct, and disseminate scholarship reflecting differing views*" on Ukraine. I asked her to explain the dissenting views on the invasion of Ukraine. She was unable to respond merely noting that she was not an expert. I then asked why she did not consult experts at the university. She shrugged the question off and moved on to the next individual.

This complete and conscious dismissal of scholarly expertise is deeply disturbing. It would not have been difficult to consult a few specialists at the university. The fact that the chief academic officer of an R1 university uses ignorance as a defense for such a momentous decision is stunning.

Policy

The university's policy on this matter is inconsistent and unclear. In fact, it is generous to even call it a policy. Overturning the vote of the University Faculty Senate, the Board of Regents recently passed a resolution of institutional neutrality, which President Cunningham has affirmed. The university administration, however, made a clear institutional statement in February 2022 in support of Ukraine in response to the invasion. This statement has never been officially repudiated.

In late March 2025, the Provost charged her advisory committee on institutional speech to determine which statements "*do or do not align with the institutional stance, or lack of stance, on an issue*". I see no justification for the retroactive removal of our statement which in fact corresponded with the university's stated position at the time. What, in fact, does the lack of a statement by the current president mean for its prior commitments and position? This strikes me as a tactic of studied ambiguity and purposeful obfuscation.

Underlining all of this is the problematic notion of institutional neutrality. Provost Croson affirmed, "*The University's position is that by not taking a stance on its official channels such as department websites, the University will be able to fully support a broad range of debate and discourse on a variety of issues.*" The university needs to be a place where we can address and discuss complicated issues. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, does not fall into this category. Following the university's logic are we supposed to "*support a broad range of debate and discourse*" on the Holocaust? Unfortunately, there are growing communities of Holocaust deniers. What about the Rwandan genocide or the butchery of the Khmer Rouge? There are always apologists for atrocities. What if we move to science? Are we not allowed to make a statement about vaccines? Do we give equal time to anti-vaxxers?

Clearly, a one-size fits all policy does not work well at a research university. We must evaluate each situation on its own merits. In abruptly removing the CAS statement on the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is more than obvious that the university administration failed to undertake such an evaluation despite the accessibility of expertise on campus.

Sincerely,



Howard Louthan
Professor of History